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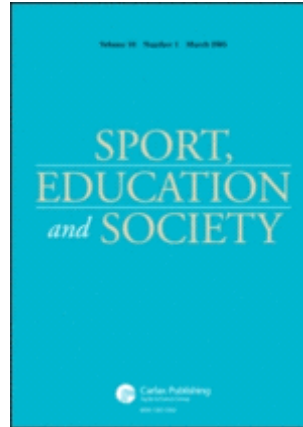
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**Policy, Contextual Matters and 'Unintended Outcomes': the English Baccalaureate (Ebacc) and its impact on Physical Education in English secondary schools**

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**Policy, Contextual Matters and Unintended Outcomes: the English Baccalaureate (EBacc) and its impact on Physical Education in English secondary schools**

**Abstract**

This paper explores the implications of the English Baccalaureate (EBacc) for secondary school physical education (PE) departments and their teachers. The EBacc is a key performance measure that is published annually for each school, which privileges a particular set of traditional academic subjects, and in doing so, marginalises other subjects, including PE. At the same time as responding to this performance measure, secondary schools in England are required to respond to a wider set of policy reforms and innovations. This can sometimes result in overlap, collision and policy clash. For example, while PE is being sidelined and PE staffing reduced by the EBacc, there is national concern surrounding issues of fitness, health and well-being that schools are expected to address and which are often traditionally seen as the responsibility of PE departments. A reduction in their staffing will inevitably have consequences for their ability to respond in meaningful ways to such non-academic policy imperatives.

Drawing on a study of the impact of recent curriculum and accountability reforms in English secondary schools (Neumann, *et al.* 2016), this paper presents evidence of the marginalisation of PE and PE teachers' ensuing concerns about their job security. It also explores changes that have been made to the PE curriculum in an attempt to make the subject more academically demanding and considers what this means for PE teachers and their students. The authors conclude that if PE is going to contribute to broader fitness, health and wellbeing agendas, then there is an urgent need for a renewed debate - that reaches beyond PE communities and constituencies - about what PE is for, why it is important and how it can be better supported.

**Keywords:** policy enactment; unintended outcomes; PE; EBacc; health; wellbeing.

## The English Baccalaureate (EBacc) and the English policy landscape

This paper focuses on the impact of a key piece of English education policy reform, the EBacc, which was introduced as a performance measure for secondary schools in 2010. The EBacc measures the percentage of students in a school who have achieved good examination passes across a core of academic subjects comprising English Language and Literature, Mathematics, the Sciences, Geography or History and a Modern Foreign Language. It has been designed to ‘nudge’ (Thaler and Sunstein, 2009) schools and students towards more traditional academic subject choices. Currently the government's aim is that, by September 2022, 75 per cent of Year 10 students in state-funded schools will study the subjects required for the EBacc, rising to 90 per cent of Year 10 students by 2025 (Long and Bolton, 2017). The EBacc works alongside another key school performance indicator, Progress 8. Introduced in 2016, Progress 8 measures the average progress a school's students make compared to the national average of students with the same prior attainment across eight approved subjects. For the purposes of calculating schools' Progress 8 scores, school subjects have been clustered into three ‘buckets’. ‘Bucket 1’ is made up of English and Mathematics which are doubled weighted. ‘Bucket 2’ contains the other EBacc subjects (Sciences, including Computer Science, Geography, History and Modern Foreign Languages), from which students are expected to select up to three subjects. ‘Bucket 3’ consists of further qualifications which can be EBacc qualifications or any other subjects from a prescribed list.

Alongside the EBacc and Progress 8, changes to the curriculum and new forms of assessment have been introduced. The curriculum changes are reflected in revisions to the subject specifications for the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) qualifications (usually taken by school students aged sixteen), which have been designed to make them ‘more academically demanding’ (DfE 2016a, p. 92). In addition, end-of-course examinations have replaced modules and coursework as the default method of assessment and a new grading system has been introduced with a scale from 1 to 9 to enable more fine grained distinctions and ‘greater stretch’ (DfE 2016a, p. 98) at the top end of the scale.

The EBacc's focus on performance and raising attainment in a core of academic subjects reflects broader global trends (Jakobi and Teltemann, 2011; Lingard, *et al.*, 2016). For example, Sahlberg (2012) writes of a Global Education Reform Movement (‘GERM’ for short) – which he describes as a disease – that is produced by supra-national bodies such as the World Bank and the IMF, international development agencies and private enterprises intervening in national education systems to disseminate

what they see as good practice. The influence of GERM, through its technologies of ‘datafication’ (Lingard, Sellar, and Savage 2014) and regimes such as PISA and TIMSS, has generated a form of policy convergence – or what Ball has called a ‘generic global policy ensemble’ (2017, p. 47). While this ensemble takes on different forms in different national settings and, as we shall see, in different schools, there are nevertheless commonalities which include a focus on raising attainment, particularly in literacy, numeracy and STEM-related subjects, examination-based high-stakes accountability frameworks, performance measurement and standardisation.

The EBacc and related reforms are the latest English manifestation of GERM, justified on the grounds that they will ‘restore rigour, and bring standards up to match the best around the world’ (DfE, 2015a, p. 8). For some time in England, the key education ‘problem’ in secondary schools has been taken by policymakers and politicians to be one of low attainment in core subjects when compared with international ‘competitors’, with, as they see it, too much focus on ‘softer’ subjects at the expense of more challenging ones, such as modern foreign languages. This claim is to some extent supported by research showing that, prior to the introduction of the new reforms, there had been a tendency for schools to enter students for vocationally-oriented examinations that boosted the scores of schools while making little or no difference to students’ employment prospects (Wolf, 2011). The EBacc, which is intended as a solution to this problem, is part of a wider accountability system, which monitors students’ progress at regular intervals throughout their school careers through national tests in core subjects. The publication of league tables of these results (Standard Assessment Tests for primary schools and GCSEs for secondary schools) is intended to ‘nudge’ schools into improving their performance. At the same time, performance-related pay is used to incentivise teachers to optimise their students’ test scores. These well-established policy technologies, which are characteristic of neoliberalism, are intended to raise standards and hold individual schools and teachers accountable for this task. For policymakers, such as Nick Gibb (2018), Minister of State for Education, ‘[i]t’s that holding schools to account that helps drive up standards across the board’.

This policy assemblage produces what Connell (2009, p. 109) has described as ‘its own [technicized] knowledge base ... that does not allow other kinds of knowledge to enter policy debate’. The consequence of all of this is that testing regimes are increasingly shaping the school day and the in-school experiences of teachers, students and children in England (Ball *et al.*, 2012; Bradbury, 2013). This in turn produces a complex set of

challenges for school leaders ‘as they seek to balance the needs of pupils with the institutional self-interest of the school in the context of local and national landscapes that are frequently incoherent’ (Greany and Higham, 2018, p. 98).

Some time ago, Ball observed that the accountability mechanisms of neoliberal public sector governance require ‘individual practitioners to organize themselves as a response to targets, indicators and evaluations’ and ‘to set aside personal beliefs and commitments and live an existence of calculation’ (2003, p. 215). This calculative existence often involves ‘an element of terror’ (Bevan and Hood 2006, p. 517); and, in some cases, because the pressure on schools to demonstrate success in national league tables, measured against pre-determined benchmarks, is so great, schools apply policies in a more directed manner than may have initially been intended by governments, a form of what Braun and Maguire (2018) call ‘anticipatory second-guessing’ policy enactment.

### **Policies into practice**

Policies are different in kind; some are constructed as suggestions for practice, while others are presented as strongly recommended or mandated for immediate action. Schools are increasingly involved in enacting many different types of policies, at different levels, at the same time. In reality, this means that some policies will ‘collide or overlap, producing contradictions or incoherence or confusion’ (Ball *et al.*, 2012, p. 7) and unintended consequences.

Schools also have different capacities for ‘doing’ policy and they draw on ‘aspects of their culture or ethos, as well as on situated necessities’ in this work (Braun, *et al.*, 2011, p. 586). As Lupton (2004, p. 4) puts it, ‘[c]ontextual factors impact on what schools do, as well as directly on what pupils achieve’, and a great deal of research has demonstrated that disadvantage and poverty shape the processes and outcomes of schooling. However, this contextual perspective is often neglected in policy discourse. When schools in difficult circumstances do better than some of their equally disadvantaged neighbours, it is often claimed that ‘good’ leadership and ‘good’ teaching are what make the difference (Gorard, 2010). As Thrupp (1998, p. 198) has argued, in many cases policymakers tend to ‘place faith in formal school management, curricula and assessment reforms to bring about changes in student performance’ displacing any account of contextual influences.



Ball, *et al.* (2012) identify a range of contextual factors in play that influence a school’s capacity to enact policies. They remind us that, while schools have to enact mandated high-stakes policies, they do not always do so in circumstances of their own choosing. This is because education policies are enacted in material conditions which give schools differential access to resources, schools serve different intakes and they are situated in sometimes dramatically different locations. These factors influence how policies are interpreted, translated and enacted in practice. Ball, *et al.* (2012) conceptualise these factors as constituting overlapping and interconnected contexts which they label ‘situated’, ‘professional’, ‘material’ and ‘external’ contexts. Hence, even when schools are located in the same areas, where they follow the same curriculum and where they employ similarly trained teachers who have to enact the same policies, the different ‘nuances of [their] local contexts [can] cumulatively make a considerable difference to school processes and student achievement’ (Thrupp & Lupton 2006, p. 309). Despite this, mandated policies frequently assume that schools are equally able to address reforms and demands in a similar fashion, thereby ‘dematerialising’ the way in which schools are treated (Braun, *et al.*, 2011). As Braun *et al.* (2011, p. 595) note, ‘policy-making and policy-makers tend to assume “best possible” environments for “implementation”: ideal buildings, students and teachers and even resources’.

At the same time mandated policies can conflict with other policies; for example, a stress on examinations may displace attempts to support students’ emotional well-being (DHSC and DfE, 2017), but such connections, relationships and tensions within and across policies are not normally acknowledged by policy-makers. In what follows, we will argue that, as far as PE is concerned, the pressures emanating from EBacc and related reforms are effectively working against a concurrent policy agenda that is concerned with addressing rising levels of obesity and promoting young people’s current and future fitness, and physical and mental health and wellbeing (Kirk, 2006; HM Government, 2015; 2016; 2018).

**Methods**

This paper draws on data collected as part of an investigation (Neumann, *et al.*, 2016) into the early effects of the reforms to the curriculum for 14 -16 year olds, national examinations and accountability measures for English secondary schools that we have summarised above. The research, which focused on the perceptions and experiences of teachers charged with

enacting these reforms, was commissioned by the National Union of Teachers (NUT), now the National Educational Union.

The research used a mixed methods approach comprising a survey of teachers and in-depth case studies of three secondary schools in the Greater London area. The survey was distributed to all secondary school members of the NUT in England (68,833) via the NUT email database and was returned by 1,800 teachers. The survey questions focused on: teachers' perceptions and experiences of the impact of the reforms on GCSE curricular offerings; their pedagogic approaches; data management; and student grouping practices. We also asked about changes to their subject and their job security. Most of the questions required structured responses, but respondents were also invited to provide free-text responses to eleven open-ended questions.

The survey questions were piloted with English secondary school teachers in different roles and levels of seniority. Amendments were made to ensure clarity in the questions being asked and some questions were deleted to reduce the time taken to complete the survey. The survey was piloted again in its modified version. The survey was administered using Bristol Online Surveys. The responses were broadly representative of the NUT English secondary school membership in terms of gender and school type (see Neumann *et al.* [2016] for further details).

To gain a richer understanding of teachers' views and experiences of the reforms, we undertook semi-structured interviews with teachers and senior leaders in three contrasting non-selective, co-educational and non-denominational secondary schools in London. The case study schools comprised a community school that had converted to being an academy school (Ashfield School), a voluntary aided school (Maple Way School) and a community school (Oak Park School). There is not the space in this paper to describe the case study schools' contexts in great detail, but, briefly, Ashfield is an 11-18 school that was categorised as 'outstanding' by Ofsted. It is oversubscribed, has an intake of largely pro-school, academically ambitious students and is well resourced. Maple Way is an 11-16 school that is rated as 'good' by Ofsted. The students experience high levels of social deprivation, and the school has serious budget problems because of its small size. Oak Park is an 11-18 school that had recently been assessed by Ofsted as 'requiring improvement' when we carried out the research. The school had experienced high head teacher turnover, extreme financial pressures and redundancies due to falling rolls immediately prior to our undertaking the research, but was starting to turn a corner under its new headteacher and new leadership team. All three schools had experienced some leadership turnover and difficulties in



recruiting in shortage subjects, although staffing difficulties were more acute in Maple Way and Oak Park than in Ashfield (see Maguire, *et al.*, 2019 for further details).

The three schools were selected to provide a contrast in terms of school type and size, as well as intake characteristics such as social class and diversity, and accountability pressures. Teachers from core subject areas (English, Mathematics and Science) and other EBacc subjects were interviewed as well as teachers in EBacc peripheral subjects (such as PE, Religious Education, and Drama). The interviews were designed to elicit participants' insights about how the reforms were being enacted in their schools and about their impact on school practices, student experiences and their subjects. We also explored any contextual factors that our respondents identified as significant to the ways in which the reforms were being enacted in their schools, as well as any unexpected outcomes of the reforms. The interviews were conducted in teachers' offices and lasted from between forty-five minutes to an hour and a half.

For the purposes of this paper, we have analysed the responses of those of our survey respondents who taught PE as their main subject (of which there were 54 out of the 1800 total responses) as well as PE teachers and senior leaders from our case study schools. Our intention here has been to analyse the ways in which the EBacc reforms are influencing the provision of PE in the respondents' schools.

In subsequent sections, we explore three themes that emerged from our analysis of the survey and case study data: the traditional subject hierarchy, what counts as a subject, and teachers' concerns about their job security. Then we draw on the three case studies to consider teachers' situated capacity to enact policy and the implications of this for the PE curriculum. In the final section we discuss what all of this means for the future of PE as a subject that is capable of contributing to broader agendas focused on young people's health and wellbeing as integral components of the common good.

### **The traditional subject hierarchy**

As Bleazby (2015, p. 672) argues, there has always been a traditional subject hierarchy, which she characterises as:

A pervasive and problematic idea which maintains that supposedly abstract school subjects, like mathematics and

physics, are more valuable than subjects associated with concrete experience, practicality and the body, such as physical education and vocational subjects.

In the case of PE, there have been moments when this subject has been prioritised, as well as other times when it has been sidelined (Houlihan and Green, 2006; Jung *et al.*, 2016; Lindsey, 2018). The traditional hierarchy of school subjects has been tweaked and sharpened at different moments of English education policy reform. For example, when the national curriculum was introduced in 1988, a distinction was made between ‘core’ and ‘foundational’ subjects. In more recent years the rules governing the publication of school performance tables were changed so that Mathematics and English had to be included amongst the five ‘good’ GCSEs students were expected to attain; and, more recently still, with the introduction of Progress 8, different types of subjects are designated as belonging to different buckets signalling that some are of more importance than others. Some subjects dominate, some merely exist on the periphery and some have been ‘disappeared’. The emphasis is now on more traditional subjects, sometimes referred to as ‘facilitating subjects’ (because they are deemed to facilitate access to high status universities) (Russell Group, 2017/18) or as ‘hard’ subjects in contrast to so-called ‘softer’ practical subjects such as PE and Design and Technology. The double weighting of English and Mathematics in the new Progress 8 measure works to further reinforce the traditional school subject hierarchy.

The survey respondents and the teachers interviewed in the case-study schools identified a number of practical outcomes arising in schools from the EBacc and related reforms. These related to how examination subject choices (options) were being managed in schools and included, in some cases, students being manoeuvred towards some areas of the curriculum and away from others. Teachers suggested that the ways in which subjects were ‘blocked’ and ‘stacked’ before they were offered to students effectively shut down some of their choices. For example, teachers reported that students were being nudged away from subjects like PE, particularly those students who were assessed as having a more traditional academic profile. SAM Learning (2016) (a leading provider of online learning resources) sums up the problem as follows:

It’s this third ‘bucket’ that is causing concern among teachers whose subjects fall outside the EBacc: art, music, drama, and so on. The

EBacc, they argue, devalues creative subjects, leaves them on the sideline. In theory, the EBacc – like Progress 8 – is promoted as a measure to ensure all students have a ‘broad and balanced’ education, yet critics argue it does the opposite, encouraging a ‘one-size-fits-all’ curriculum. By making performance in at least five EBacc subjects a measure of a school’s performance, schools are far more likely to force students into these subjects, whether or not it is appropriate for each and every student.

This commentary mirrors the sorts of concerns that teachers of all subjects reported in the survey and interviews. The backlash to this hierarchy has been strong and high-profile in the creative communities, represented by organisations such as the National Campaign for the Arts, the Cultural Learning Alliance and the Campaign to Reform the EBacc (‘Bacc for the Future’). One argument put forward by the supporters of this campaign is that the EBacc has limited students’ access to subjects such as art, dance, design, drama, music and other creative subjects (Johnes, 2017). In contrast, it has been much harder to trace and track any critical resistance to the EBacc’s reinforcement of a traditional subject hierarchy from within the PE community whose subject is located in the third ‘bucket’.

In our survey, PE teachers wrote of changes being implemented in their own schools that they saw as limiting student access to PE. For example, respondents commented that:

No subjects have been removed but nearly all have been put in one option block and students have been told to choose the EBacc. (Head of PE department in stand-alone academy)

[The] value of sport/art/creative subjects [is] diminish[ed] by being placed] in the 3<sup>rd</sup>/4<sup>th</sup> bucket. (Head of PE department in chain academy school)

PE and creative subjects are no longer considered high priority. Students fear picking them as they feel it may not be looked at in the same way as EBacc subjects. Particularly those going on to take A levels and possibly higher education. (PE teacher, multi-academy chain)

One PE teacher, responding to the survey, put it very bluntly, writing that: ‘practical subjects like PE and art have been shoved to the side’ (PE teacher in a community school). A head of year eleven, and a PE specialist, in one of our case study schools explained in some detail what he thought was happening as a consequence of the EBacc:

once they [the students] pick their options, the way that this school works is they have an interview with an SLT [senior leadership team] member. And I know for a fact for the real, real academic kids, the kids that are gonna get their As and A\*s in anything they do, if they've chosen my subject, they [SLT] will try to convince them subtly to ditch it and to take something that is in bucket 2 instead. (Head of PE, Maple Way School)

In our survey, PE teachers reported that examination entrances in their subject had decreased. According to a report published by the office that regulates qualifications, examinations and assessments in England, in 2018 national examination entries 'in EBacc subjects increased (by 5 per cent) and entries in non-Bacc subjects decreased (by 13 per cent) compared to 2017' (Ofqual, 2018, p. 1.). According to the same report, the number of students entered for PE GCSE fell from 112,550 in 2017 to 87,825 in 2018. In our survey, 45 per cent of PE teachers reported that examination entry rates had decreased in their subject compared to only 4 per cent of Mathematics and English teachers and 20 per cent of teachers of other EBacc subjects. (Although it should be noted that the percentage of teachers reporting a decline in entry rates for their subject was even greater for other non-EBacc subjects than it was for PE. For example, the equivalent figures for teachers of creative subjects and vocational subjects were 82 per cent and 84 per cent respectively.)

While this decline might not matter if students are still accessing a rich PE experience, the high-stakes accountability context of the contemporary maintained sector means that the chances of this happening are likely to be reduced. This is because, in high-stakes accountability contexts, the status of subjects studied by students who are not taking examinations in those subjects tends to diminish. In our survey, for example, teachers reported that time allocated to non-EBacc subjects or subjects that many students study but do not take examinations in, such as personal, social and health education, citizenship education and religious education, is being reduced and resources are being re-distributed to the higher status subjects, especially those designated as 'core' in the EBacc hierarchy. One of our survey questions asked teachers whether they agreed with the statement that as a result of the EBacc and related reforms 'more students are withdrawn from class for 1:1 catch up provision'. At 83 per cent agreement, PE teachers were the most likely of all our survey respondents to agree with this statement. The equivalent figure for all teachers of non-EBacc subjects was 77 per cent; and for English and Mathematics and other EBacc subject teachers the agreement rates were 54 per cent and 66 per cent respectively. Penney *et al.* (2009, p. 421) have written of how in

England and 'internationally, professionals have been endeavouring to protect and/or enhance the position of physical education within schools'. Our data suggests that in England the EBacc and related reforms may be seriously eroding the gains that have been made for PE in recent years, including, in particular, the gains flowing from the ring-fencing of funding for PE and sports by successive governments (Lindsey, 2018).

**What counts as a subject? What counts as PE?**

Turning to the second main theme that emerged from our data analysis, questions were raised by respondents in the survey and interviews about what 'counts' as PE in the reformed content of the curriculum. The work of E.D. Hirsch (2016) on the importance of 'hard' subjects has been highly influential in international governmental and policy circles. Hirsch argues that working-class students are often failed by having less access to the kinds of knowledge (or cultural capital) that provide access to higher status further study and employment routes. He refers to this as a 'knowledge deficit'. In the new GCSE subject specifications, it is possible to discern Hirsch's influence. Through these new specifications the content of all subjects, including those such as PE that are lower in the subject hierarchy, has been made more academically demanding; and, in addition, there is a greater emphasis on written examinations, with a reduced percentage of the overall grade for GCSEs in practical subjects being designated for performance and practical work.

In the new specifications for PE (DfE, 2015), there is more emphasis on academic content (about anatomy, physiology, sports psychology, socio-cultural influences and the use of data) and less emphasis on the practical development of attitudes, dispositions and skills. Not surprisingly, the PE teachers who responded to our survey expressed concerns about this shift in emphasis:

Massively reduced practical experience for students as far less of their final grade will be generated from their practical ability. (PE teacher, multi-academy trust)

Reduced weighting of the practical element of the course (60%-40%) even though it is a practical course (PHYSICAL education). (PE teacher, academy converter school).

PE teachers (and teachers of other subjects) also reported anxieties about the equality implications of changes in the subject specifications:



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3 Middle and low attainers will find things much more difficult and  
4 have more limited choices at KS4 [Key Stage Four]. New  
5 courses/specs are less inspiring and students who previously  
6 performed well in practical subjects, will their grades be lower than  
7 their peers in previous years? (Head of PE Department, Community  
8 School).

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12 We are limiting the number of students taking GCSE PE as its  
13 requirements are simply too great for many of our students. (Head of  
14 PE, Community School)  
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18 When we compared our survey data across all the non-EBacc subjects, PE  
19 teachers were the most likely to agree that their subject had become less  
20 accessible for lower attaining students, with 96 per cent of PE teachers  
21 agreeing with this statement compared to 87 per cent of non-EBacc  
22 teachers overall.  
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26 There is clearly a conflict here between the emphasis on academic  
27 knowledge in the PE curriculum specifications and broader health and  
28 wellbeing-related policy imperatives. The reduced emphasis on active  
29 participation, i.e. movement and action, contradicts national and  
30 international policy agendas oriented to addressing obesity through a focus  
31 on fitness, health and well-being in schools (Cale and Harris, 2013; Foster,  
32 2018). According to an NHS Digital (2018) report, 26 per cent of adults  
33 and one in five children in year six (aged 10-11) were classified as obese in  
34 2016/17, and in June 2018 the Government published the second  
35 installment of its childhood obesity action plan that had been launched in  
36 2016. This signaled that the Government would 'review how the least  
37 active children are being engaged in physical activity in and around the  
38 school day' (HM Government, 2018, p. 27). Noting that regular activity  
39 has been linked to improved mental and physical health as well as  
40 academic attainment, and citing earlier NHS Digital (2017) research, the  
41 plan's authors pointed out that only around one in five children do the 60-  
42 minute daily minimum of physical activity recommended by the Chief  
43 Medical Officer (p.28). Similar concerns have been expressed by the  
44 Youth Sport Trust (2018) which recently reported that PE provision in  
45 secondary schools has declined dramatically, particularly in the key  
46 examination years. Our findings suggest that, in secondary schools, the gap  
47 between what is recommended and what is provided may be due, at least in  
48 part, to schools' concerns to ensure adequate coverage and provision of  
49 EBacc subjects, particularly English and Mathematics, which, as noted  
50 above, are double weighted.  
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### Concerns about job security

The third significant area of concern for PE teachers relates to their own job security. If schools prioritise the resourcing of EBacc subjects – as it makes sense for them to do according to the prevailing accountability logic – then non-EBacc subjects are less likely to be offered at examination level in some schools, precipitating cuts in staffing and possibly omission from the curriculum offer altogether. In our survey, teachers were asked to report on levels of student take-up of their subjects. The responses from the PE teachers show that changes had occurred that had consequences for their subject's position in their schools. For example, 74 per cent of PE teachers agreed with the statement that 'my subject has lost a significant number of students'. The equivalent proportions for teachers of other subjects were 2.5 per cent of Mathematics and English teachers, 28 per cent of teachers of other EBacc subjects, and 72 per cent of all non-EBacc teachers. As Bailey (2018, p. 52) has argued, 'the curricular position of PE has always been somewhat precarious', which is 'less about the inherent value of the subject and its content than the ways general school curricula have tended to be conceptualised and justified'. Our survey and interview data suggest that this precarity is particularly heightened currently.

One PE teacher wrote:

Our timetable has been reduced so that we have had to pick up other subjects we are not a specialist in to teach. I disagree with the way they have forced us to become overstaffed and are now making us teach something we are not comfortable to teach and not trained to teach. This will not raise standards and sets us up to fail. (PE teacher, multi-academy trust school).

If PE teachers become side-lined or 'left out in the cold' like this, their promotion prospects may wither unless they can move into another more secure area of secondary school work or move to a school with a stronger commitment to PE. The example highlighted by this teacher represents a presumably unintended outcome of the EBacc and associated reforms.

In the survey, we asked teachers about their views on job security in their subject areas. Teachers of EBacc subjects, not unexpectedly, were far more likely to report feeling secure about their positions than teachers of subjects not included in the EBacc. For example, the proportion of teachers agreeing with the statement that, 'These reforms have decreased job security in my subject area' was 22 per cent of Mathematics and English teachers, 40 per cent of teachers of other EBacc subjects, 76 per cent of PE teachers, and 79 per cent of all teachers of non-EBacc subjects.

The situation for PE teachers and those intending or desiring to teach PE has been made even more complicated by recent policy initiatives, precipitated by a shortage of teachers in some core EBacc subjects (Foster, 2018). A DfE position paper on the allocation of teacher training places stated that the cap on teacher-training places for school and university-led providers was to be lifted for courses starting in September 2018, except for secondary school PE and some primary teacher education courses that have been over-subscribed (DfE, 2018). The government is aware that it can recruit far more PE teachers (and primary school teachers) than are needed. In a nimble policy turn, the ‘wicked’ policy problem of teacher shortages in certain subjects has been subject to a strategic policy intervention that is justified by reference to the EBacc policy landscape. To illustrate this point, it is worth citing the DfE (2018, p. 7) paper in some detail:

In response to sector demand, we are introducing for 2018 to 2019 a new scheme that allows [teacher training] providers to request additional PE places. Trainees filling these places are required to train in an additional EBacc subject alongside their main specialism of PE, so that they are capable of teaching this in school. We expect that these places are ‘PE with’ courses, which will require trainees to demonstrate the Teachers’ Standards in PE only but include training in an additional EBacc subject. In order to be eligible, candidates must have at least grade C in the A level or equivalent subject knowledge in the EBacc subject. (DfE, 2018)

This policy has been welcomed by some and been received more sceptically by others, but, whatever one thinks of it, this particular policy move illustrates the power of the EBacc and its continuing direct and indirect impact on PE teachers.

### **Contextual matters**

Our case study data is particularly helpful for illuminating the impact of context on schools’ capacities to enact policy reforms, reminding us that whatever the policy, some schools will always be better placed than others to respond to its demands. For example, schools that are more secure in their league table positionings and Ofsted rating tend to be less caught up in ‘fire-fighting’ and more able, therefore, to anticipate and plan their strategic responses to new policy developments, make policies their own, and meld them to their own culture and ethos. They are also more likely to have the resources and flexibility to ‘get ahead of the game’, for example

by making key appointments and changes in their curriculum offer – or alternatively resisting changes in their curriculum offer. For example, Ashfield, a well-resourced school with an ‘Outstanding’ Ofsted rating, unlike our other, less well-resourced and less secure case study schools, decided not to allocate any additional time to English and Mathematics, despite the double weighting of these subjects in the calculation of schools’ Progress 8 scores. Its justification for this was that a rich, broad curriculum would help more students do well in all their subjects. The school values its PE curriculum and is extremely well resourced with all-weather fields, tennis and netball courts, grassed fields, an all-purpose sports hall, fitness suite and a gymnasium. The Sports Department consists of ten members of staff and every student at Ashfield has two hours of PE every week throughout all their years in school. Additional time is also given to PE examination groups which is not the case in the other two schools. In stark contrast, Maple Way is severely hampered in its ability to offer adequate PE provision by its lack of access to physical resources and space. As the Head of the PE department put it:

obviously what doesn’t help us is we have no facilities at this school, so there’s no fields, there’s no football pitches, there’s no grass, we don’t get to go offsite, so it really, really does impact.

Ashfield’s senior leaders are aware that their capacity to innovate and to pro-actively lead and manage change is enabled by their relatively generous resourcing and strong track record in relation to official indicators of success. With regard to the latter, the assistant head teacher explained:

Now because we’re an outstanding school ... we’re protected. So there are so many changes, one which is affecting this, one which is affecting that, so it’s incredibly difficult to know what it is that’s changing the different things because there are too many things. So I think the fact that the pressure is off us from Ofsted... is certainly not making us complacent but is making us go, ‘OK, well we don’t need to panic’ ... [W]hat we’ve tried to do as a school is actually, as schools should be doing, is actually use what the government is recommending to our own advantage.

Schools like Ashfield that enjoy more favourable contexts are better able to work with policies, including EBacc and related reforms, make them their own and successfully manoeuvre around or contest aspects that they are less persuaded by.

**Conclusion**

Against a backdrop of neoliberal policy making (what Sahlberg [2012] calls the ‘GERM’), a new but unstable policy settlement has emerged, reflecting a more generic shift in public service discourses and practices (Ball, 2017), in which individuals, departments and schools are held responsible for meeting performance benchmarks. Schools have to respond to these benchmarks but in circumstances not always of their own choosing and in ways that can have unintended consequences and outcomes that may contradict other policy imperatives. Schools enact policies in the light of their situated reality as well as in relation to ‘wicked’ policy problems like teacher-shortages. In PE departments, as in all other subject departments, there is a recognition of the ‘obvious’ need to attend to accountability demands, even where these contradict and render invisible other policy demands such as those to do with young people’s fitness and lifelong physical and mental health and wellbeing. However, we have also seen that some schools are better placed than others to protect their PE provision.

With regard to the role and purpose of PE in schools, it would seem from the data we have presented here that we are currently at a particular moment when PE finds itself, yet again, in a precarious and contradictory place. Unlike earlier periods when key politicians and policy-makers were convinced about the need to strengthen PE provision in state schools and a great deal of money and energy underpinned this commitment (Jung, *et al.*, 2016; Lindsey, 2018), we are now in a period where individual responsibility, ‘hard’ knowledge and high-stakes testing are dominating the national policy agenda as well as the practical agenda in many schools. The current policy moment is also one where, as Houlihan and Green (2006, p. 90) have suggested, there appears to be ‘a singular absence of consensus over values and beliefs regarding school sport and PE’. This may well have contributed to the subordination of PE by the recent curriculum and accountability reforms. As we have seen, these reforms are reinforcing a more traditional school subject hierarchy that is resulting in a reduction of examination entries in, and funding and time for, PE in many schools, and a concomitant increase in job insecurity for PE teachers.

Ball (2017, p. 11) has argued that, for some time in England, education policy has been a radical project which is concerned with changing what counts as knowledge and ‘rethinking, or “reimagining”, education and what it means to be educated’. In the subordination of PE by the EBacc and related reforms, it would appear that what we are seeing is an erosion of the possibilities for broader-based provision that contributes towards young people’s current and future fitness and their physical and mental health and well-being (Evans, 2013). What is urgently called for, we suggest, therefore, is a renewed debate - that reaches beyond PE communities and

constituencies - about what PE is for, why it is important and how it can be better supported.

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